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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the features of verbal disagreements arising among 25 adolescent students with mild intellectual disabilities and 25 of their typical peers. Transcripts of a learning task were coded using an adaptation of Eisenberg's (1992) scheme for analyzing verbal conflicts. Findings of the study indicate: (1) in verbal conflict engagements with normal-progress peers, the adolescent with mild mental retardation (MMR) assumed a respondent role; (2) normal-progress peers dominated during verbal disputes, initiating conflicts at almost twice the rate of the adolescents with mild mental retardation; (3) about 70 percent of the conflicts that the adolescents with MMR initiated were in response to their partner's request for action; (4) the adolescents with MMR failed to use higher level conflict initiation moves at the rate used by their peers, which may be indicative of poorer social monitoring, language impairments, or both; (5) throughout the entire length of conflicts, the adolescents with MMR employed justifications noticeably less often; (6) adolescents with MMR typically debated lesson content but also debated lesson process and assistance; and (7) in most conflicts, negative affect was absent, but when it was displayed, it typically was reciprocated. (Contains 34 references.) (CR)

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CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED AND NORMAL PROGRESS ADOLESCENTS DURING A PROBLEM-SOLVING TASK

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the features of verbal disagreements arising between adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities and their normal-progress peers. Transcripts of a learning task were coded using an adaptation of Eisenberg's (1992) scheme for analyzing verbal conflicts. Important characteristics that adolescents with intellectual disabilities demonstrated during conflict negotiation will be described.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- To evaluate the conversational strategies that mildly intellectually disabled adolescent learners employ to negotiate solutions to disagreements that occur when interacting with a normal-progress peer.

REASONS FOR STUDYING VERBAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN MILDLY INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED AND NORMAL ADOLESCENTS

1. Theoreticians believe that conflict is a powerful impetus to development (Piaget, 1932).

2. It has been demonstrated empirically that conflict is a tool for promoting cognitive change (Bearison, Magzamen, & Filardo, 1986; Forman & Kraker, 1985).

3. Conflicts are negotiated by talking (Garvey & C. U. Shantz, 1992; O'Keefe & Benoit, 1982; Garton & Renshaw, 1988).

4. Studies of the conflict behavior of normal children have examined conflict talk (Eisenberg, 1992; Garvey & C.U. Shantz, 1992).

5. Co-operative learning is a prominent educational arrangement in classrooms. Conflict assumes a vital role in well-functioning co-operative learning engagements (D. W. Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 1991).

6. Conflict has been reported to be a prevalent problem among individuals with intellectual disabilities (Graziano & Bercow, 1985).

    a) Direct conflict is a source of stress for adolescents with mild learning handicaps (Anderson-Levitt, 1985; Wayment & Zettin, 1989).

    b) Studies conducted from the vantage points of interpersonal understanding and social cognition implicate conflict as an area of weakness for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Affleck, 1975; Bradley & Meredith, 1991; Hughes & Lyles, 1994).

c) The behaviour that adults with intellectual disabilities exhibit during conflict negotiation role plays is poorer than that of normals (Sherman, Sheldon, Harchik, Edwards, & Quinn, 1992).

d) Analysis of the multi-party verbal conflict episodes arising in a group home for adults with intellectual disabilities indicated deficits in conflict negotiation (Hewitt, Duchan, & Segal, 1993).

7. There are no studies exploring the verbal conflicts that arise between mildly intellectually disabled adolescents and their peers.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Conflict	When one person does something to which a second person objects (Hay, 1984, p.2).
Compliance Exchanges	Simple two-unit conflict exchanges (Laursen & Hartup, 1989).
Mutual Opposition	Longer exchanges involving mutual opposition (C. Shantz, 1987; D. Shantz, 1986).

METHOD

Subjects

Table 1 Mean Age and Standard Deviation of the Participants, TOPL Age Equivalency Scores and TOAL-3 Total Quotients

	Intellectually Disabled			Normal-Progress		
	n	Mean Age (mos.[a]) [years-mos.]	s.d.[b] (mos.)	n	Mean Age (mos.[a]) [years-mos.]	s.d.[b] (mos.)
Females	13	171.85 [14-4]	13.01	13	160.08 [13-4]	9.13
Males	12	167.25 [13-11]	9.48	12	158.50 [13-3]	7.88
Total	25	169.64 [14-1]	11.39	25	159.32 [13-3]	8.41
TOPL Test Age		168.92	11.39		158.12	8.07
TOPL A.E. (mos.)		108.60	23.53		164.40	20.49
TOAL-3 Total Quotient		57.60	10.17		95.92	14.34

[a]mos.: months
[b]s.d.: standard deviation

Procedure

Language Assessment

- Test of Adolescent and Adult Language (3rd ed.) (TOAL-3) (Hammill, Brown, Larsen, & Wiederholt, 1994).

- Test of Pragmatic Language (TOPL) (Phelps-Terasaki & Phelps-Gunn, 1992).

Educational Activity

- Dyads completed the Fort Walsh (CLASS, 1987) learning activity, a computer-based social studies activity.

Conversations were coded using an adaptation of Eisenberg's (1992) scheme for the analysis of verbal conflicts.

RESULTS

Conflict Negotiation - Descriptive Statistics

Number of Conflicts

- The 25 dyads had 211 verbal conflicts.
  Mean = 8.44 conflicts
  Range = 1-15 conflicts
  Standard Deviation = 5.06 conflicts

Conflict Length

Mean = 2.19 conversational turns
Range = 1-15 turns
Standard Deviation = 1.88 turns

Type of Speech Act Opposed

211 Conflicts:
- 146 (69.19%) arose in response to a partner's ***request for action***
- 33 (15.64%) arose in response to a partner's ***statement of intent***
- 32 (15.17%) arose in response to a partner's ***statement of fact***

Explicit Negative

- Used in 32 (15.17%) of the 211 disputes
- Onset of a verbal disagreement - seldom signaled by an explicit negative

- Normal-progress used explicit negative during 20 (14.81%) of 135 disputes initiated by the normal-progress students
- Intellectually disabled used explicit negative during 12 (15.79%) of 76 disputes initiated by the intellectually disabled students

Negative Affect

- Seldom occurred.
- Consisted of slightly increased: vocal harshness/intensity, speech rate, and prosodic emphasis.
- Normal-progress 15.17% (32/211 conflicts).
- Intellectually disabled 14.69% (31/211 conflicts).

For Conflicts of 2 or more Conversational Turns:
- Negative Affect - Normal-Progress 24/109 conflicts (22.02%)
- Negative Affect - Intellectually Disabled 26/109 conflicts (23.85%)

Justification Within Verbal Disagreements

- Intellectually disabled used justification at any point within the conflicts for 26.07% (55 of 211) of the disputes.
- Normal-progress used justification at any point within conflicts for 42.65% (90 of 211) of the disputes.

Last Conversational Turn

- Intellectually disabled held the last turn for 46.92% (99/211) of the verbal disputes.
- Normal-progress took the last turn for 53.08% (112/211) of the verbal disputes.

Does the student who initiated a verbal conflict also take the last turn in the conflict?
- In 83 of the 135 (61.48%) conflicts initiated by the normal-progress student, it was also the normal-progress student who held the last conversational turn.
- In 47 of the 76 (61.84% of the disputes initiated by the intellectually disabled student, it was also the intellectually disabled student who held the last conversational turn.

Conflict Initiator

Of the 211 conflicts recorded:
- 135 (63.98%) initiated by the normal-progress
- 76 (36.02%) initiated by the intellectually disabled

Conflicts initiated almost twice as frequently by the normal-progress student.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1 — Mildly intellectually disabled adolescents will demonstrate qualitative and quantitative differences in the conversational strategies that they employ for negotiating disagreements that arise in a dyadic problem-solving task, a computer-based educational engagement with a normal peer.

Conclusion:
Confirmed.

Hypothesis 2 — Intellectually disabled students will initiate verbal disagreements substantially less frequently than their normal-progress peers.

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test - Sign Rank = 6, p-value = 0.0005

Conclusion:
Significant.
Intellectually disabled students initiated verbal disagreements substantially less frequently than their normal-progress peers.

Hypothesis 3 — Students, when occupying the role of opposer and opposee, will demonstrate different strategies for influencing their partner.

Examine: (a) Type of Speech Act Opposed (Table 23)
(b) Conflict Initiation Moves (Table 26)

Conclusion:
Confirmed - see Tables 23 and 26.

Table 23: Speech Act of the Utterance Opposed, by Initiator of the Disagreement

	Initiator: Normal - Progress		Initiator: Intellectually Disabled		Total	
Speech Act	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Request for Action	91	67.41%	55	72.36%	146	69.19%
Statement of Intent	24	17.78%	9	11.84%	33	15.64%
Statement of Fact	20	14.81%	12	15.79%	32	15.16%
Request for Permission	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	135	100%	76	100%	211	100%

Table 26: **Initial Opposition Strategies used by Normal-Progress and by Intellectually Disabled Adolescents**

Opposition Strategy	Initiator: Normal - Progress		Initiator: Intellectually Disabled		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Simple No	11	8.15%	9	11.84%	20	9.48%
Indirect No	7	5.19%	11	14.47%	18	8.53%
Justification	27	20.00%	12	15.79%	39	18.48%
Alternative	43	31.85%	27	35.53%	70	33.18%
Delay/Distract	16	11.85%	8	10.53%	24	11.37%
Question/ Challenge	31	22.96%	9	11.84%	40	18.96%
Total	135	100%	76	100%	211	100%

Hypothesis 4 In disagreements where negative affect is present, it will be demonstrated by both the opposer and opposee.

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test - Sign Rank = -22, p-value = 0.0479

Conclusion:

Significant.

Where negative affect was present, it was demonstrated by both participants in the disagreement.

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Hypothesis 5: When the initial opposition consists of a "simple no", conflicts will be continued beyond the turn containing the "no" response.

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test - Sign Rank = -9, p-value = 0.70

Conclusion:

Highly nonsignificant.

The study failed to confirm that conflicts with a "simple no" would be continued beyond the turn containing the "no" response.

Hypothesis 6: Conflict length would be shorter when the initial opposition contained an "alternative", or contained a "justification" as a conflict initiation strategy. That is, "justifications" and "alternatives" as an initial opposition are more likely to lead to a termination of a conflict episode.

Friedman's nonparametric test for paired data (F 2,26 = 4.71, p-value = .018)

Conclusion:

The null hypothesis that the three categories of conflict initiating moves have similar lengths was rejected.

Bonferroni adjustment: p-value = .025 to assess statistical significance of the two contrasts

"justification" vs. "other" (p-value = .0316)
Conclusion: Marginally Nonsignificant

"alternative" vs. "other" (p-value = .5218)
Conclusion: Nonsignificant

Hypothesis 7: In disagreements during learning engagements, the intellectually disabled student will submit more frequently than the normal-progress peer.

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test - Sign Rank = 39, p-value = 0.0893

Conclusion:

Nonsignificant.

The intellectually disabled student does not submit more frequently than the normal-progress peer.

Hypothesis 8: Standoff will be a prevalent conflict outcome.

Standoff outcome = 20.85%
Males - 21.85%
Females - 19.57%

Conclusion:
Standoff was not a prevalent conflict outcome. Submission outcomes were more common.

Hypothesis 9: The normal-progress student will take the last verbal oppositional turn significantly more often than the intellectually disabled learner.

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test - Sign Rank = -50, p-value = 0.0784

Conclusion:
Marginally nonsignificant.
The intellectually disabled learner did not take the last verbal oppositional turn significantly more often than the normal-progress peer during verbal disagreements.

Hypothesis 10: There will be evidence of compliance episodes (opposition moves made by the normal-progress student that are not pursued by the intellectually disabled student).

102 of 211 conflicts (48.34%) were single-turn conflicts.
63 (61.76%) of 102 single-turn conflicts were initiated by normals. However, the normal-progress student initiated 63.98% of all disputes.

Conclusion:
The intellectually disabled students experience more compliance episodes than their normal-progress peers. However, the relative frequencies for "compliance exchanges" mirror the overall conflict rate.

Hypothesis 11: Normal-progress peers will use the less direct question/challenge conflict initiating move significantly more frequently than their intellectually disabled counterparts.

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test - Sign Rank = -105, p-value = 0.0001

Conclusion:
Highly significant.
The "question/challenge" conflict initiating strategy was used significantly more often by the normal-progress peer than by their intellectually disabled counterparts.

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DISCUSSION

Conflict Initiator

- Verbal conflicts were initiated by the normal-progress students nearly twice as often as by the intellectually disabled students.
- This means that intellectually disabled students experience the role of respondent/opposee more frequently than the role of initiator/opposer during verbal disagreements.
- The substantially lower conflict initiation rate of intellectually disabled students may prevent the exchange of ideas that promotes intellectual development also may have implications for:
  - moral development
  - social development
    - acquisition of the sense of social structure
    - resolution of conflicts within friendships

Initial Opposition Moves

Moves	Researchers
Simple No	
Indirect No	
Justification*	Hewitt et al. (1993) Sherman et al. (1992)
Alternative*	Sherman et al. (1992)
Delay/Distraction*	Garton & Renshaw (1988)
Question/Challenge*	Hewitt et al. (1993)

*Researchers have suggested these are "higher level" conflict initiation moves.

- ***Simple no*** did not result in conflict continuation.

- ***Justification*** as an <u>initiation</u> move - produced shorter exchanges, but this was marginally nonsignificant.

- The normal-progress students used ***justifications***, ***delay/distractions*** and ***question/challenges*** at a higher rate than did the intellectually disabled students. The study confirmed that mildly intellectually disabled students (both males & females) used **higher level** conflict initiating moves at a lower rate than their normal-progress peers.

- The rate for the normal-progress students was particularly greater for the ***question/challenge*** move (a move believed to **soften** disagreements).

- The intellectually disabled female students used the ***alternative*** conflict initiation strategy more often than their normal-progress peers. The ***alternative*** may be a **higher level** conflict initiation move that is readily used by the mildly intellectually disabled students.

Negative Affect

- Students maintained positive affect throughout most of the verbal disagreements that arose during the learning task.

- When demonstrated, negative affect consisted of increased vocal intensity and prosodic features typically judged by native English speakers as **negative**.

- Negative affect was more prevalent in **mutual** conflicts than in ***compliance exchanges***.

- Hypothesis testing confirmed that when negative affect was demonstrated by one learning partner, it also was reciprocated by the other. This underscores the importance of teaching students to maintain positive affect.

Justifications Within Disagreements

- Conflict exchanges that offer a reason are shorter than ones in which an explanation is not offered.

- Justifications may be an important verbal skill for averting conflicts that degenerate into aggressive or violent acts as intellectually disabled individuals frequently display aggression or behaviour disorders.

Compliance Exchanges versus Mutual Conflict

- In this study - simple disagreements (***compliance exchanges***) prevailed.
  Piaget (1932) distinguished "primitive" & "genuine" disagreements.
  "Primitive" - simply statements of conflicting views.
  "Genuine" - include justifications for their respective positions.
  Since normal-progress students initiated disagreements most often, the implications of these compliance exchanges must be considered.

- Do intellectually disabled students abort the conflict because of a "failure-accepting" (Covington, 1993) approach to academic activities?

- Do difficulties with conversational repair shorten disagreements?

- Renshaw & Asher (1982) - Children with low sociometric status were more likely to select "avoidant" goals.

Conflict Topic

- Normal-progress students debated ***lesson content*** more often than did the intellectually disabled students.

- The intellectually disabled students debated ***lesson process*** and ***assistance***.

Issues: The importance of lesson content.
The activity/task chosen for this study: ***declarative*** knowledge (vs. ***procedural*** knowledge).

Last Turn

- The normal-progress student did take the last turn more often, but this was marginally nonsignificant.

- The student who initiated the conflict also seemed to be the student who was taking the last turn more often.

Conflict Outcomes

- The hypothesis that the mildly intellectually disabled would submit more often was marginally nonsignificant.

- Standoff and compromise - relatively infrequent outcomes.

- Like Eisenberg (1992) - compromise seldom occurred.

- Standoff was at 20.9% (lower than in other studies).
  Eisenberg (1992) - 64.00%
  Vuchinich (1987) - 61.00%

- Perhaps in peer disputes, there is a lower rate of standoff than in authority relationships.
- The computer activity may have biased the outcome in favor of submissions, and imposed restrictions on the conflict outcomes available to the participants.

CONCLUSIONS

- In verbal conflict engagements with normal-progress peers, mildly intellectually disabled adolescents assume a respondent role.

- Normal-progress peers dominate during verbal disputes, initiating conflicts at almost twice the rate of adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities.

- About 70% of the conflicts that the mildly intellectually disabled learner initiates are in response to their partner's ***request for action***.

- Adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities fail to use **higher level** conflict initiation moves at the rate used by their peers.

  May be indicative of poorer social monitoring, impaired language facility, or both.

- Throughout the entire length of conflicts, mildly intellectually disabled students employ justifications noticeably less often.

- Their conflicts with peers are brief (about 2 conversational turns). Close to half of their conflicts with normal-progress peers are single-turn compliance exchanges (i.e., primitive conflicts).

- Adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities typically debate lesson content but also debate lesson process and assistance.

- In most conflicts, negative affect is absent, but when it is displayed it typically is reciprocated.

The results suggested mildly intellectually disabled learners may be marginalized in moral (Kohlberg, 1981), social (Selman, 1980), and cognitive (Piaget, 1932) growth.

- Weaknesses identified at the junior high level should be addressed by interventionists and educational practitioners before these students transition to the work force.

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APPENDIX A

Coding of Disagreements Arising in Learning Engagements

Categories of Analysis (adapted from Eisenberg, 1992)

1. Who initiates the conflict: the intellectually-disabled (ID) adolescent or the normal-progress (N) peer;
2. Number of oppositional turns;
3. Presence or absence of negative affect (in the form of harshness of vocal tone, crying, whining, or screaming) – intellectually disabled student;
4. Presence or absence of negative affect (in the form of harshness of vocal tone, crying, whining, or screaming) – normal progress peer;
5. Presence or absence of justification by the intellectually-disabled adolescent;
6. Presence or absence of peer justification;
7. The individual taking the last verbal oppositional turn;
8. The speech act category of the opposed utterance – requests for action, requests for permission, statements of intent, statements of fact;
9. The topic of the conflict – lesson content, lesson process, assistance, other;
10. The outcome of the dispute – submission ID, submission N, compromise, standoff;
11. The type of initial opposition – simple no, indirect no, justification, alternative, delay/distraction, question/challenge;
12. Whether the initial opposition included an explicit negative.

APPENDIX B

Coding Example 1

0 Peer: 'Kay, your turn to read.
1 I.D.: No, your turn. Go on.
0 Peer: [Begins to read] "In this..."

Initiator	Intellectually Disabled
Number of Turns	1
Negative Affect	Absent for Both
Justification	Absent for Both
Last Turn	Taken by Intellectually Disabled
Speech Act	Request for Action
Dispute Topic	Lesson Process
Dispute Outcome	Normal-Progress Submits
Initial Opposition	Alternative
Explicit Negative	Present

Coding Example 2

Peer: We can have one more. [i.e., one more item on the list of things to take]
0 I.D.: We need to have wagons.
1 Peer: Yeah, but we also had the canoe last time and the interpreter.
2 I.D.: Unless we want to take the canoe?
3 Peer: Wait a minute. Remember, along the way we got one of these, the interpreter?
4 I.D. Yeah.
5 Peer: So we can probably take something else.
6 I.D.: We don't need a barber. We can take lumber and nails.
7 Peer: Okay, then we are allowed one other thing. It is either the canoe or the wagons?
0 I.D.: Canoe

Initiator	Normal-Progress
Number of Turns	7
Negative Affect	Absent for Both
Justification	NP provides reasons - ID does not
Last Turn	Taken by Normal-Progress
Speech Act	Request for Action
Dispute Topic	Lesson Content
Dispute Outcome	Intellectually Disabled Submits
Initial Opposition	Alternative
Explicit Negative	Absent